

## Chapter 5: Outcome Evaluations

This chapter provides a step-by-step outline for conducting an outcome evaluation, which is the process of measuring whether a program has met its goals and can answer important questions about the program (Thompson and McClintock 1998).

Outcome evaluations are useful for financial planning, grant writing, and program monitoring. They are also good tools for validating program practices.

### Steps in Developing an Outcome Evaluation

“We decided to assess our program because we needed to know what to expect. There were no national data so we didn’t know whether things were good, bad, or indifferent.”

Developing an outcome evaluation entails six steps. The following sections provide a brief overview of each step followed by detailed descriptions:

1. Determine the goals.
2. Develop the objectives.
3. Identify procedures and processes.
4. Determine the outcomes.
5. Select the instruments.
6. Build the logic model.

#### Determine the goals

Outcome evaluation is, in part, the process of judging whether a program is achieving or has achieved its intended goals (Craig and Metze 1986). A clear determination of the program’s goals is central to beginning this process and may be done collectively with the assistance of the members of the team. For goals to be useful, they should be specific. For example, rather than stating that the goal is to shorten the investigative process, the goal could be more concretely stated as decreasing the length of time between referral to the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) and the point when a decision is made about whether to prosecute the case.

#### Develop the objectives

Once goals have been determined, objectives can be developed. Objectives describe the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that the program intends to bring about. Constructing objectives involves writing operational definitions of the goals. The goals must be defined using terms and concepts that are observable and measurable. Defining concepts in operational terms can be one of the more difficult tasks encountered, but it is considered the hallmark of good research and evaluation.

It is important to develop goals and objectives so the program results can be verified. The program’s goals and objectives form the foundation for selecting measures for the outcome evaluation and, hence, verifying results.

Two interim steps should be completed before specifying the outcome to be measured by the evaluation: identifying the procedures and identifying the processes needed to convert the program's procedures into outcomes.

"Our greatest problem is we [the center and agencies] haven't agreed on the goals of the center—what is a positive outcome?"

United Way also provides excellent guidance on developing goals, objectives, and outcomes (United Way of America 1996). The following four points may be useful in creating clear objectives (Shortell and Richardson 1978):

**Use strong action-oriented verbs.** Use strong concrete verbs to describe the observable or measurable behavior that will occur, such as "increase" rather than the weaker, less specific term "promote." Strong action verbs include "to meet," "to increase," and "to find." Weaker verbs include "to understand," "to encourage," and "to enhance."

**State only one purpose or aim.** The aim describes what will be done. Even though a center has multiple objectives, write only one objective at a time, clearly stating a single purpose for each. This enables the evaluation team to evaluate each objective separately and thus enables the center to determine which objective it is meeting. Specifying two or more objectives simultaneously makes it difficult to determine whether the center has truly achieved its objective because some, but not all, of the objective might be achieved. For example, rather than stating that the objective is to increase the number of cases accepted for prosecution and thereby increase conviction rates, break these objectives into two clearly defined

objectives. The first objective might read: to increase the number of cases accepted for prosecution from 10 to 15 over a 1-year period; and the second objective might read: to increase the rates of conviction of perpetrators from 3 to 5 out of 100 over a 1-year period.

### **Specify a single end product or result.**

Results describe evidence that will exist when the evaluation has been completed. As with specifying a single aim, specify a single result to clearly tie the result to the aim. For example, "to establish communication" is an aim rather than a result. Determine what constitutes evidence of communication in concrete terms (e.g., a telephone call, a meeting, a report); these are the results. If results are not specified, assessing success is difficult.

### **Specify the expected time for achievement.**

It is also useful to specify the time-frame for achieving an objective. "As soon as possible" is not specific enough. It is more useful to specify a target date or range of target dates, such as "between May 1 and May 30."

## **Identify procedures and processes**

After the goals have been developed and the objectives defined, the next step is identifying the procedures needed to achieve the processes and outcomes.

Procedures, processes, and outcomes are related in the following way:

Procedures → Processes → Outcomes

**Procedures** are the program's activities that constitute the delivery of services. The procedures are chosen because they are hypothesized to produce changes in clients. How those changes come about is referred to as a process.

**Processes** differ from procedures in that processes usually occur within the client,

whereas procedures are observable actions of professionals and others who are trying to help the client (Yates 1996).

**Outcomes** are the result of services and are specified in terms of goals.

To develop an outcome evaluation, it is essential to examine the relationship between procedures, processes, and outcomes. For example—

The CAC implements a program that involves having a specially trained interviewer interview children (procedure). Children who are interviewed by a specially trained interviewer are more comfortable and therefore experience lower levels of stress while being interviewed (process). Children with lower levels of stress provide a more complete account of the events (outcome).

For each of the stated goals, describe in detail the procedures in place to accomplish the goals. A good outcome evaluation requires a program monitoring evaluation to ensure that the procedures are implemented as intended.

Process involves how change comes about. To identify the process responsible for change, it is necessary to identify a theory and then construct if-then statements.

**The importance of theory.** According to Chen and Rossi (1992), evaluation should be driven by theory. Program theory is defined as the set of assumptions about the manner in which the program is related to the social benefits it is expected to produce and the strategy and tactics the program has adopted to achieve its goals and objectives. Thus, theory describes what you believe happens and why.

The following example demonstrates the importance of having a theory before the

evaluation begins. Let's say there is a high incidence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in a particular jurisdiction. In response, a CAC is developed in the community. Five years later there is a large decrease in the incidence of CSA cases in that jurisdiction. What accounts for the reduction?

- There is a comprehensive method of processing CSA cases (i.e., the CAC).
- Cases are taken more seriously when they are reported (e.g., immediate response).
- Increased resources are available in the jurisdiction (e.g., revitalization or gentrification).
- Citizens are initially more likely to report CSA because they have learned there is a quick response to the problem.
- Unemployment has decreased in the jurisdiction.
- The individuals working on prevention programs in that jurisdiction are dedicated.
- The people working on these cases are more educated about the issue of CSA and therefore respond more effectively.
- There is greater publicity that CSA cases in the jurisdiction are being processed and prosecuted quickly and effectively, which may deter some perpetrators.
- The time from reporting a CSA case to prosecution has been shortened and thus fewer children are being victimized.
- The presence of the CAC in the community reminds potential perpetrators that CSA is taken seriously and therefore deters the perpetrator from offending against children (at least in that jurisdiction).
- More perpetrators are being sentenced, so fewer perpetrators are in the community.

A combination of these factors could be at work, so it is important to collect data on as many of these factors as possible in order to test the competing explanations.

**If-then chain of events.** Some predictions must be made about how the program's activities might affect the outcomes. This hypothesis should be a testable (i.e., definable, observable, and measurable) statement that specifies a possible relationship between different aspects of a problem (Craig and Metze 1986). A preferred method for developing a hypothesis is to construct detailed if-then statements (United Way of America 1996). For each specific goal component to be evaluated, create if-then statements. For example—

**If** there is a case review, **then** team members will share information.

**If** team members share information, **then** information distribution will be expedited.

**If** information distribution is expedited, **then** the investigation period will be shorter.

**If** the investigation period is shorter, **then** the length of time from receiving a report of CSA to a prosecutorial decision will be shorter.

The theory selected has important implications for what is chosen to measure. For example—

**If** multiple interviews are theoretically viewed as a stressor to children, **then** reducing the number of interviews should result in children experiencing lower levels of stress. Therefore, to determine whether the number of interviews reduces children's stress, children's stress levels should be measured.

## Determine the outcomes

Outcomes are the operational definition of objectives. Consider the following factors when developing outcome statements.

**Indicators of outcomes.** Indicators of outcomes must be observable, measurable, and unambiguous. They might include the number of events occurring in a specified period of time, the events themselves, or the number of questions asked of clients. For example, an indicator of parent satisfaction can be reflected in the answers parents give on a questionnaire about their perceptions of the center. An indicator of a speedy investigation might be the number of days between initial referral and a subsequent decision to prosecute.

"The Child Crisis Unit [law enforcement] compared statistics for Year 5 and Year 6. They found that arrests increased 73 percent and confessions increased 72 percent. They attribute this to the CAC team."

**Inferences based on research.** If outcome indicators are unavailable, then existing research may be used to make inferences about outcomes. For example, if research shows that multiple interviews are stressful to children, and it can be shown that the CAC is conducting fewer child interviews per child, one might infer that children are experiencing lower levels of stress. However, such inferred evidence is not as strong as measurable indicators.

**Immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.** To understand the entire process, consider outcomes that are immediate, intermediate, and long term.

The following is an example of a series of if-then statements that include immediate, intermediate, and long-term goals:

**If** CSA cases are processed using the CAC's specially trained interviewers (input), **then** children will experience lower levels of stress than children whose cases are processed through a conventional criminal justice system (immediate outcome).

**If** children experience lower levels of stress, **then** they will provide a more complete disclosure (immediate outcome).

**If** children provide a more complete disclosure, **then** prosecutors will be more likely to accept the case and prosecute the alleged perpetrator (intermediate outcome).

**If** the prosecution accepts more cases for prosecution, **then** children may have to testify. However, children with lower levels of stress may appear more competent while testifying (intermediate outcome).

**If** children appear competent while testifying, **then** more perpetrators will plead guilty or be convicted (intermediate outcome).

**If** perpetrators plead guilty or are convicted, **then** they will be less likely to abuse children again (intermediate outcome).

**If** perpetrators are less likely to abuse children, **then** fewer children will be sexually abused (long-term outcome).

An evaluation may not include long-term outcomes, which is perfectly acceptable. The following steps are useful, nevertheless, for thinking through the problem:

**Define parameters.** Clearly define what responsibility and credit the CAC can take for various outcomes. To say that CSA decreased in a community with a CAC might be inappropriate if the CAC processed only 20 percent of the reported cases.

To say that a CAC is responsible for a communitywide reduction in CSA leaves the CAC open to criticism if the CSA rate increases because unemployment increases. Always define the outcome parameters in a way that allows only the CAC to be held accountable for the outcome.

**Measure and include multiple outcomes.** A program for child victims of sexual or physical abuse (i.e., the CAC) should have diverse procedures, targeted processes, and outcomes. Therefore, measure as many outcomes as is reasonable. Measuring the same concepts in multiple ways also permits the CAC to have greater confidence in the results.

**Define success thresholds.** In defining outcome success, Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey (1999) recommend defining a "success threshold" for various services. Then, how many clients moved from below that threshold to above it after receiving CAC services can be reported. For example, a success threshold might be moving children 10 points on the Child Behavior Checklist rather than moving children from above to below the clinical level on the Child Behavior Checklist.

**Specify outcomes at different levels.** Outcomes may differ by level. For example, an indicator of success at the governmental level might include employment, the economy, and the political climate. An indicator at the family level might include parent satisfaction with the CAC's services. Both kinds of information can provide meaningful information for interpreting the results of the evaluation (see "Contexts," chapter 8).

**Approximate goals.** Goal approximation is another way to conceptualize outcomes. The goal approximation form in exhibit 5.1 facilitates the CAC's thinking in terms of a scale of possible outcomes, from negative to positive.

### Select the instruments

Once the outcomes are identified, select instruments to measure those outcomes. Appendix D contains forms and questionnaires for measuring outcomes in the following categories:

#### ■ Multidisciplinary Team

- Child Advocacy Center Team Evaluations
- Key Informant Interview Questions
- Interagency Collaboration Questionnaire Forms
- Child Advocacy Center Team Meeting Assessment

#### ■ Child Investigative Interview

- Assessment of the Interviewer

#### ■ Mental Health Services

- Assessing Mental Health Services
- Mental Health Services—Therapist Form
- Form for Clinical Treatment Goals
- Treatment and Outcomes Survey
- Client Outcomes Reporting Form
- Initial and Discharge Diagnostic Assessment Form

#### ■ Medical Examination

- Assessing Medical Services

- Genital Examination Distress Scale
- Child's Perceptions of the Genital Examination for Child Sexual Abuse
- Parents' Perceptions of the Genital Examination of Their Child for Child Sexual Abuse
- Physician's Perceptions of the Medical Examination

#### ■ Court Process

- Children's Perceptions of Court-Related Stress

#### ■ Case Tracking Forms

- CARES NW Statistics Sheet
- Case Tracking Questions
- AWAKE Intake Report
- CARES Program Intake Information Form
- Georgia Center for Children Intake Sheet
- Child Advocacy Center Evaluation/Case Tracking Forms (for Information Gathered by Child Protective Services (CPS))
- Child Advocacy Center Evaluation/Case Tracking Forms (for Information Gathered by Law Enforcement (LE))
- Child Advocacy Center Evaluation/Case Tracking Forms Worksheet Legal/Court Process (for Information Gathered by County Attorney)
- Georgia Center for Children Child Victim Fact Sheet
- St. Luke's Regional Medical Center—Prosecution Case Disposition Form



## Putting it all together: Building the logic model

After completing all the steps described earlier, practice the steps by putting them into one cohesive package, called a logic model. A logic model guides the process of developing the outcome evaluation. A completed model is provided in exhibit 5.2. Completing a logic model offers the team an opportunity to examine the relationship between the CAC's activities and the program's outcomes. It is an excellent exercise for the entire team.

The logic model form has several headings, which are described in the following sections.

**Background factors.** Background factors are characteristics of people involved in the evaluation that may influence the relationship between program activities and goals.

**Program activities.** Program activities, similar to inputs, are the particular components of a CAC, such as the multidisciplinary team and mental health services.

**Inputs.** Inputs are activities that make up a particular program.

**Outputs.** Outputs are the activities that result from program activities.

**External factors.** External factors are events or factors that occur during an evaluation that may influence whether the program accomplishes its goals.

**Immediate outcomes.** Immediate outcomes are the results that occur in temporally close proximity to the activities, such as whether the case is accepted for prosecution. Including prosecution rates as an outcome requires patience because outcomes may not be available for quite some time (often 2 years after the child is initially seen at the CAC).

**Intermediate outcomes.** Often an intermediate outcome is necessary for a long-term outcome to be accomplished. Intermediate outcomes are results that occur between immediate and long-term outcomes, such as a conviction.

**Long-term outcomes.** Long-term outcomes are benefits that accrue to society when intermediate outcomes are produced and maintained for many people over substantial periods of time. Thus, long-term outcomes typically result after the individual has departed from the program. A long-term outcome might reflect that the number of prosecutions in a jurisdiction increases or that rates of CSA decrease in a given jurisdiction as a result of increased prosecutions.

### Unintended or negative outcomes.

When planning an evaluation, be aware of possible unintended or negative consequences of the evaluation. For example, the evaluation might affect populations that were not targeted (e.g., parents or offenders). Think about and note in the logic model the possible risks to other participants. The goal approximation form (exhibit 5.1) helps develop these ideas. Consider how to avoid or minimize the risks. It may be necessary to determine whether the risks are outweighed by the benefits gained from the evaluation.

**Instruments.** Indicate which instruments will be used to measure each outcome. Instruments may need to be created to measure particular outcomes that reflect the program's goals.

## Sample outcome measurement framework

Similar to the logic model form is an outcome measurement framework form (exhibit 5.3). Use whichever form meets the needs of the evaluation team. The two forms have some differences, but they cover some of the same information.

## Limitations of an outcome evaluation

Keep in mind the possible limitations associated with an outcome evaluation. The limitations should not deter centers from conducting evaluations; they are simply noted as issues to consider.

**Failure to cover all important outcomes.** If the outcomes selected for the evaluation are not appropriate or if they fail to cover all important outcomes, then efforts to improve the program based on this faulty information may prove detrimental. Therefore, take the time to carefully examine what the center wants to learn from the evaluation.

**Corruptibility of indicators.** It is human nature to want an evaluation to turn out favorably, and it is possible to manipulate the outcome indicators to make performance look better than it really is. Be aware of this tendency or use external evaluators to combat it.

**Interpretation of results.** Interpretations made out of context can be misleading and damaging. It is preferable to explain outcome data in the context of the program. For example, one program or activity might be considerably more difficult to implement than another, such as an onsite versus an offsite medical examination. Direct comparisons of the two services would be unfair.

## Implementing an outcome evaluation

Once goals and outcomes have been determined, follow the steps delineated in chapter 4 on program monitoring.

The following is a brief synopsis of the steps for conducting an outcome evaluation (Scriven 1993). The first four steps have been discussed in this chapter in detail:

1. Determine the goals of the program.
2. Convert these goals into measurable objectives.
3. Operationally define the variables.
4. Find or construct tests that measure these objectives or determine thresholds.
5. Define and recruit the population to be sampled (chapter 7).
6. Run tests on an appropriate sample of your target population (chapter 9).
7. Use data synthesis techniques (statistics) to unify the results in order to determine whether or to what extent the program has met its goals (chapter 10).
8. Report the program evaluation results in terms of the program's success in meeting its goals (chapter 11).